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Withstanding Discrimination and Inequity: Unit Rationale

As a Language Arts teacher, I consider it my personal responsibility to prepare my students for the prospects of higher education by broadening their daily lessons further than the basics of conjunctions and semicolons. Proficient use of grammar and conventions can lead to fine writers, but I plan on developing my classes by cultivating their overall understanding of universal values. Developing a strong sense of cultural awareness is a necessity for our students to achieve their educational goals while establishing any hopes for successful careers in their futures. With this in mind, my unit revolves around cultural awareness and an appreciation for diversity. My constructed unit, called “Withstanding Discrimination and Inequality”, focuses on establishing an understanding that differing cultures strengthen our society while racial stereotypes affect our realities through a negative lens. Author Peter Smagorinsky mentions in his text that students are more willing to invest their time into their classwork when they “can work toward a contemporary vision of how a particular topic might be imagined in their own society” (Smagorinsky, 111). By the end of the unit, students will be able to read, write, and speak from equitable perspectives.

Young adult literature is an amazing venue to enrich student knowledge of their realities by encouraging critical inquiry through creative contexts. I’ve chosen a variety of print and non-print text to incorporate into the lesson, but the primary source used in class will be Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird*. The critically acclaimed novel has been approved for 8th grade level readers and provides a variety of teachable themes, varying from courage and justice to strong family ties. As mentioned previously, moral development is a personal goal and students will surely grow in their understanding of cultural awareness from this text. To further expand their knowledge through other sources, I will include a short story called *The Lottery* to answer the essential question of whether or not it is acceptable to challenge social norms. A poem from African-American poet Langston Hughes will also be incorporated to expand on the struggle of civic rights existing in the time frame of the novel. Modern day media will also be used to compare and contrast historical context with current social expectations. Students will understand prejudice by watching *X-Men: First Class* and will also analyze universal themes of current songs dealing with discrimination of some type. Current newspaper articles and artwork will also be analyzed and interpreted by the students to further reveal the detriment of hateful dispositions.

By learning about the negative effects resulting from discrimination, interdisciplinary instruction becomes a part of the unit. The students are currently enrolled in History and Government classes, which will eventually cover the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Written during this time of social discourse and upheaval, *To Kill A Mockingbird* reflects on an important part of American history which cannot be overlooked. It exposes social practices that young adults may not yet be aware of and can educate them on the relevance of social and cultural equality. Connecting both their readings from Language Arts and History/Government will tremendously impact their knowledge of the subject matter. With that in mind, it is very possible to collaborate with certain History/Government teachers to create projects that correlate with Language Arts. Though I have already constructed my calendar for the unit, I am open to reevaluating project due dates to accommodate to another schedule.

“Withstanding Discrimination and Inequity” begins by outlining the major events of civil inequality in our class novels, but ultimately encourages an appreciation of diversity in general. *To Kill A Mockingbird* follows two young children, Scout and Jem Finch, as they watch their father endure harassment for defending a black man who is deemed unworthy of a fair trial due to the heavy atmosphere of racism and injustice in the past. By reading a novel about social discourse, students will understand the value of facing adversity for a virtuous cause. The novel also relate to various audiences, because of the universal lessons established from reading chapter to chapter. Smagorinsky addresses this notion by stating in his text that, “Adolescent literature in particular often features youthful protagonists dealing with the kinds of problems that students are likely experiencing, both those that have endured across the ages and those that are more current” (Smagorinsky, 141). Harper Lee covers discrimination, racism, civic cruelty, and growing into an adult through the skillfully portrayed characters of her novel. Students of all types may have already experienced some of these lessons, while others have yet to fully comprehend them. Either way, all audiences are able to appreciate the message behind the Harper Lee’s mockingbird.

State standards are also addressed in the various writing assignments, creative projects, and class seminars carefully scheduled in the unit calendar. During certain crucial moments of the text, students will complete journal entries where they will, “Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader create such effects as suspense or humor” (KCCRS, 4). Foreshadowing and the development of inference skills will result from such practices. For their substantial written essay and final performance tasks, students will, “Cite textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text” (KCCS, 4). Each of these major assignments will asks students to produce a written product that requires critical inquiry while practicing in-text citations from the novel to support their claims. Anchor standards for writing will also be a necessity, where they will, “Analyze how a modern work of fiction draw on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works such as the Bible, including describing how the material is rendered new” (KCCRS, 7). The primary novel was published in 1960, which provides a large time frame between then and now. Though the text is older, the issues discussed in the text are still prevalent in current issues, such as LGBTQ rights and bullying in schools. Students will be connecting multiple texts together to deepen their understanding of the unit’s theme. Students will also be involved in a great deal of class discussions and project presentations to further develop their knowledge through their peers. As addressed in the Kansas College and Career Ready Standards, they will, “Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly” (KCCRS, 10). As Smagorinsky states, “The same text might be read quite differently by two readers in the same class who bring different cultural expectations to the experience” (Smagorinsky, 126). For students to develop an equitable perspective on racism, they must be open to various opinions and points-of-view.

Much of the unit is composed of in-class journal entries and writing assignments, but technology will still be incorporated in necessary areas. Audio recordings of *To Kill A Mockingbird* will be used almost daily to complete the reading of the novel. Caitlin Dakin discuss in her article “The Effects of Comprehension through Close Reading” features a section stating that “audio recordings, discussions, and interviews proved to retain student engagement throughout the reading process of a text as opposed to other reading strategies” (Dakin, 51). Students remain engaged when they are able to follow along with a professionally read audio interpretation of the chapters, allowing them to retain the information in a more productive manner than reading on their own. PowerPoint slides will be used for our five-minute grammar practice every day, but will also be used to pose prepared prompts for their journal entries. Eventually, students will be required to type well-developed, organized, and professional essays to be assessed. The computer lab has been booked for the selected weeks in which students will need access to Microsoft Word. Due to the necessity of daily readings, journal entries, and class discussions, technology is not incorporated as much. Yet, it is available when it is necessary.